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Growing Up Abroad: Italian and Romanian Migrants' Partial Transitions to Adulthood

Laura Moroşanu^{a1}, Alexandra Bulat^b, Caterina Mazzilli^c and Russell King^c

^aDepartment of Sociology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

^bSchool of Slavonic and East European Studies, UCL, London, UK

^cDepartment of Geography, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

ABSTRACT

Drawing on in-depth interviews with young Italians and Romanians, representing two of the largest “old” and “new” European populations in Britain, this paper examines migrants’ experiences in the spheres of work, family, and “home”, and their narratives of “growing up” abroad, to enhance our understanding of youth transitions to adulthood in the context of intra-EU migration. Contrary to accounts that see migration as a strategy to either delay or advance adulthood, our analysis offers a more complex picture, showing how migration may unevenly affect transitions to adulthood, advancing some, and delaying others. Furthermore, we extend debates around the meaning of adulthood, illustrating the central role migration plays in generating feelings of “growing up”, even when traditional markers of adulthood are absent, and how these are negotiated transnationally in relation to home-based peers, in ways that combine old and new understandings of adulthood.

KEYWORDS

Coming of age, intra-EU mobility, Italian migration, Romanian migration, transnational relationships, youth transitions

¹ Laura Moroşanu: L.Morosanu@sussex.ac.uk

It is well-known that people often migrate at a young age. This is also true for recent European movers to Britain, whose average age at migration falls in the mid-twenties (Dustmann and Frattini 2013). How does the “freedom to move” to another country at this critical stage in the life-course shape young Europeans’ careers, relationships, living circumstances, or, more broadly, their transition to “adulthood”? Whilst there is a vast literature on youth transitions to adulthood, how migration shapes these processes, and migrants’ perception of coming-of-age, remain comparatively less understood. This is particularly so within the EU context, where several factors, including lower barriers to cross-border mobility, the appeal of living in cosmopolitan European cities, but also the socio-economic insecurities and inequalities exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis, have led many young people across both “old” and “new” EU states to migrate.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with young Italians and Romanians, representing two of the largest “old” and “new” European populations in Britain, this paper explores migrants’ experiences in the spheres of work, family, and “home”, and their accounts of “growing up” abroad, in order to enhance our understanding of youth transitions to adulthood in the context of intra-EU migration. We reveal how migration can unevenly impact youth transitions to adulthood, accelerating some and delaying others, challenging assumptions that they typically occur in tandem. Furthermore, the paper contributes to debates around the meaning of adulthood, showing how migration enables feelings of “growing up”, which is negotiated transnationally in relation to migrants’ home-based peers in ways that combine old and new understandings of adulthood.

Youth mobility and transitions to adulthood

Adulthood has traditionally been linked to accomplishing several goals: completing education, securing stable employment, moving away from parents, getting married or

forming a partnership, and having children (Benson and Furstenberg 2007). These transitions to adult status, which would happen relatively early, smoothly, and simultaneously, have become considerably “de-standardised” over the past decades, marked by delay, disruption or even reversal (Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Molgat 2007). Contemporary youth’s prolonged education, employment insecurity, and delayed family formation common in prosperous Western societies are increasingly visible elsewhere, as illustrated by Italy and Romania, our participants’ countries of origin.

This prolongation of youth has been interpreted in contrasting ways, reflecting the diverse factors behind it, as well as individuals’ varied experiences, depending on their national, social or cultural location (Amit 2011; Côté and Bynner 2008; Silva 2013). On the one hand, Arnett (2000) describes it as a period of “possibilities”, experimentation in “love, work, and worldviews”, and identity-searching, free from the constraints imposed by adult responsibilities. Others underscore the structural factors that disrupt the traditional transitions, and see this as a way of coping with risk and insecurity (Amit 2011; Blatterer 2007; Côté and Bynner 2008; Frändberg 2014; Mary 2014; Molgat 2007). Specifically, the relatively stable and predictable work (and life) trajectories that marked the postwar period in industrialised countries have become increasingly inaccessible, due to a combination of social, economic, and cultural transformations since the 1970s, including: the disappearance of stable, manufacturing employment, replaced by precarious service-sector jobs, reduced social support mechanisms, and the general advance of neoliberal discourses and policies, which extol individualism, flexibility, and mobility in the labour market and society (Silva 2013; also Blatterer 2007; Mary 2014). The expansion of education, women’s increased labour market participation, and the weakening influence of traditional institutions and norms, pertaining to employment, family or sexuality, have thrown further uncertainty over

transitions to adulthood, placing the responsibility onto youth to identify suitable life pathways (Côté and Bynner 2008; Molgat 2007).

The extension of youth raises questions about how young people define adulthood. Arnett (2000) notably highlights the declining relevance of traditional markers of adulthood for contemporary youth, who prioritise “individualistic” attributes, such as assuming responsibility or independent decision-making. Studying American working-class youth, Silva (2013) similarly underscores the importance of individualistic criteria, stressing, however, the difficulty to achieve adulthood in the traditional sense of stable jobs or relationships, and orientation towards self-growth to establish “competent” versions of adulthood. However, traditional markers of adulthood are not entirely obsolete. Young people may retain conventional aspirations towards accomplishing them in the future, even as they willingly delay adulthood (Amit 2011) or combine them with individualistic criteria (Molgat 2007).

Engaging with these debates around the extension of youth and changing meaning of adulthood, we examine how migration to Britain shapes young Italians’ and Romanians’ trajectories in the spheres of work, family, and “home” (understood as stable, independent residence), and how migrants make sense of their coming of age. Research on transitions to adulthood has largely been in non-migration contexts. Although migrants typically leave home when they are young, migration researchers have paid scant systematic attention to how migration impacts the transition to adulthood in relation to the debates discussed above. Extant research that connects these phenomena tends to focus either on migrants’ children, who grow up in the parents’ destination country and face various challenges to integration (Gonzales 2011; Rumbaut 2005) and negotiating transnational life and families (Tse and Waters 2013), or on youth moving independently. Our interest is in the latter, where studies can be broadly divided into two categories.

First, youth mobility may be a strategy to delay adulthood, as found, for example, in the case of British youth who choose to study and travel abroad in order to enjoy a period of fun and exploration, and “escape” early career decisions and educational pressures at home (Waters et al. 2011). Analogous examples include Canadian youth, whose international experience means “taking time out” before “settling down” into adult roles (Amit 2011); or “self-searching” young Japanese on “working holidays”, undertaken to escape adult-related pressures and expectations, and discover “what they really want to do” (Kato 2013). This phenomenon has been typical of middle-class youth from affluent countries, who have resources to move, time to experiment, and support available, if needed (Amit 2011; Waters et al. 2011). However, it has increasingly encompassed a wider range of youth in the context of EU free movement, as reflected in research on Polish migrants, who often invoke the desire for adventure or exploration (e.g. Ryan 2017).

Instead of delaying adulthood, in our second category, mobility becomes a strategy, or indeed an imperative, for accomplishing it (Punch 2015). Various studies, many conducted in poorer or developing regions, document how young people resort to internal or international migration for economic or educational purposes, to meet social expectations or enhance their status in their communities. Examples include young Peruvians who leave impoverished rural areas for better education (Crivello 2011), Senegalese men who migrate to Europe to provide for their families and gain prestige at home (Mondain et al. 2013), or Romanian rural youth who experience employment precariousness in the context of post-communist deindustrialisation and market transition (Horváth 2008). Unlike their privileged counterparts, who temporarily eschew adult responsibilities, these young people migrate to realise adulthood.

Whether focusing on delaying or accelerating adulthood, studies on young migrants that engage with youth transitions debates provide useful insights into migration motivations

and changing ties with “home” (cf. Gabriel 2006). Although some explore how migration affects specific transitions, e.g. family-related amongst Poles in Britain (Heath et al. 2015), how young movers make sense of their coming of age, and the role of migration therein, require further exploration, since existing studies highlight both conventional aspirations for future “settled” lives (Amit 2011) and the transformative experience of migration (Kennedy 2010), echoing newer conceptions of adulthood. Our study of Italians and Romanians in Britain addresses these questions, expanding our understanding of youth transitions and meanings of adulthood in the context of intra-EU migration.

Within the EU, the freedom of movement, ease of cross-border travel, combined with the economic precariousness experienced by many youth, aggravated by the 2008 crisis in various parts of Europe, have enhanced youth mobility. About half of European citizens aged 16-30 aspire to migrate, with some of the new EU member states, including Romania (61.9 per cent), registering the highest aspirations, and Italy (58.9 per cent) following closely (van Mol 2016). If intra-EU mobility was initially depicted as a strategy undertaken by middle-class youth from Western countries in search of adventure, upward mobility, and freedom from the rigid life and career pathways entrenched at home (Favell 2008), recent research documents the mobility or mobility intentions of Eastern and Southern European youth, seeking greater economic security and opportunities to build independent adult lives, particularly after the EU’s eastward enlargements and the recent economic crisis (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Dubucs et al. 2017; Ryan 2017; White 2010). These “new” youth mobilities incorporate lifestyle considerations but employment-related motivations remain strong (Lulle et al. 2018).

Looking at young Italians and Romanians in the London region, we ask how migration shapes first, their transitions to adulthood in different spheres of life, and second, their understanding of adulthood. The paper makes several important contributions. First, it

shows how migration may unevenly affect and decouple transitions to adulthood in the work, family, and residential spheres. Challenging unilateral perspectives that see migration as either accelerating or delaying youth transitions, it shows how migration may help advance those in the spheres of work and independent living, whilst delaying or suspending others (marriage/partnership and children). Second, the paper refines our understanding of adulthood by showing how migrants may combine old and new markers of adulthood, i.e. future aspirations to “settle down” in their lives and jobs with newer ingredients of growing up, centred on self-development. We show how migration itself enables participants to assert distinctive versions of adulthood, even when traditional criteria are absent. Furthermore, following Silva’s (2012) analysis of adulthood as an “interactional accomplishment”, we illustrate how migrants construct their coming of age transnationally, in relation to home-based family and peers, who serve as reference points, sources of validation or contestation. Finally, by comparing Italian and Romanian migrants’ experiences, the paper expands our understanding of intra-EU mobility, uncovering similarities and differences between “old” and “new” Europeans’ youth transitions in the context of free movement.

Background and methods

The paper is based on 40 in-depth interviews with Italian and Romanian migrants in Britain, conducted during Autumn 2015-Spring 2016. Romanians and Italians represent some of the largest EU migrant populations in other member states (Eurostat 2017a), including the UK, where Romanians come second (after Poland) and Italians fifth (after Ireland and India), with 411,000 and 297,000 nationals respectively (ONS 2018).

Italians are amongst the oldest beneficiaries of free movement within Europe, with a long history of migration to Britain (Scotto 2015). Compared to the traditional economic migrants in the postwar period, who came from the impoverished south of the country, recent

studies focus on young, urban, educated Italian migrants, attracted by cosmopolitan lifestyles and career opportunities in London or other European capitals, and highly critical of their home-country institutions and limited career prospects (Dubucs et al. 2017; Scotto 2015; Lulle et al. 2018). Whilst the 2008 crisis *per se* may not figure prominently in their narratives, its impact on youth unemployment, currently over 37 per cent for under 25s, twice the EU average (Eurostat 2017b), and job precariousness (Bartolini et al. 2017), likely shapes migration decisions.

Romania is one of the newest EU members, joining in 2007. The UK has only become a key destination for Romanian migrants in the last decade, yet Romanians have large and longer-established migrant communities in other EU countries, notably Italy and Spain. Romania's difficult post-communist transition and economic situation have played a crucial role in its high out-migration rates. Although youth unemployment (around 20 per cent) is not as high as in Italy (Eurostat 2017b), Romanians, alongside Bulgarians, have the lowest earnings in the EU (Eurostat 2017c), and young people often struggle to find suitable jobs. Romania's EU accession, the crisis that acutely affected other important destinations (Italy and Spain), and the lifting of transitional work restrictions in 2014, made Britain increasingly attractive for work or study opportunities, at least before the EU referendum, when we collected our data.

Unlike Italians, Romanian migrants have been negatively portrayed in their European destinations, including the UK, where the (tabloid) press regularly depicted them as a social, cultural or economic threat (Fox et al. 2012; Moroşanu and Fox 2013). That recent Italian and other "old" European movers had conversely raised little concern (Favell and Nebe 2009) before the 2016 referendum transpires in our participants' encounters with positive (albeit stereotypical) reactions to Italianness amongst British peers.

Our sample included 20 men and 20 women (evenly divided between Italians and Romanians), who worked in various occupations, including chef, baker, waiter, shop supervisor, architect, researcher, and engineer. This sample was drawn from a larger cross-national project (YMOBILITY), which explored how mobility shaped life-course transitions amongst student, higher- and lower-skilled young intra-EU movers. The YMOBILITY project used tertiary education to determine “skill” level, and for the interviews, defined “young” as aged 18-39 (maximum 35 at migration). Our UK-based sample thus included a balanced mix of student (10), university-educated (19), and secondary-educated participants (11), recruited via personal networks, social media, and snowballing. Participants were aged 19-39, with a mean of 28 for both groups, and little variation between genders. About half of the Romanians, and two thirds of the Italians were single. Only three were married, two (Romanians) had children and one (Italian) was expecting a child. Participants typically migrated after completing secondary or university education, or sometimes several years of insecure, low-paid work. Most lived in London, apart from six based in Brighton. Romanians came from various large cities (12), and small/midsize towns (8); Italians mainly from midsize (15) or smaller towns/villages (5) in North or Central Italy.

Participants were not explicitly asked how they understood “adulthood” and whether they saw themselves as adults. “Growing up” was a spontaneously recurrent theme in both Italians’ and Romanians’ accounts, when they were questioned about their experiences abroad, the advantages and risks of migration, how they compared to non-migrant peers, and how their values changed post-migration. We also covered work and career plans, living arrangements and leisure time, relationships and future plans. These themes offered valuable insight into how transitions to adulthood unfolded, and how participants perceived them. The interviews were conducted in migrants’ native language, recorded, anonymised, and transcribed into English by interviewers fluent in both languages.

Migrants' decoupled transitions to adulthood

If migration is sometimes undertaken to delay adulthood (Amit 2011; Waters et al. 2011), the opposite occurred in our case: it was the difficulty to accomplish or imagine desirable career transitions at home that prompted many Italians and Romanians to seek work or study opportunities abroad. Aspirations to travel, explore, or escape the “small world” of their hometown were not uncommon, yet dire employment prospects, malfunctioning institutions, and difficulties to establish independent lives prevailed in migration motivations, echoing other Eastern or Southern Europeans' experience (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Heath et al. 2015; Lulle et al. 2018; Scotto 2015; White 2010). Only a few migrated because they did not feel ready to “settle down”, and even those usually developed career-oriented aims post-migration. However, instead of working uniformly to accelerate transitions to adulthood, as Heath et al. (2015) found amongst Polish migrants in Britain, migration unevenly impacted our participants' trajectories, helping them advance mainly in the spheres of work and independent living; less so with respect to family life. In what follows, we discuss these aspects of transitioning to adulthood, where migrants achieve progress, albeit often partial; we then explore implications in the domestic sphere, highlighting the fragmented and decoupled nature of youth transitions to adulthood.

Earning one's independence

Large-scale analyses show that Western Europeans in Britain tend to be better qualified, work in higher-skilled jobs, and experience considerably less over-qualification compared to their Eastern European counterparts, who suffer considerable disadvantages in the labour market (Johnston et al. 2015). Against this broad picture of diverging work trajectories, our purposeful selection of students, higher- and lower-skilled migrant workers, and focus on Italians and Romanians, revealed important similarities across the “old”-“new” EU divide (on

Spaniards and Poles in Norway, see Bygnes and Erdal 2017). Many Italians and Romanians coming to Britain “started from the bottom” in precarious jobs in cleaning, construction, shops or restaurants, readily available for hard-working, flexible youth, yet far removed from the career aspirations that motivated them to leave. Subsequently, most progressed towards more stable, better-paid jobs. Although these often fell short of participants’ qualifications or aspirations, they conferred a much-valued sense of financial independence and expanded migrants’ lifestyle choices.

Working in London brought significant relief from financial strain particularly amongst Romanian participants (also Lulle et al. 2018). “If you do find a job [in Romania]”, Vlad explained, “you are paid very badly, you can’t survive”. Maria, now a shop supervisor, recalled how they carefully recorded all expenses in Romania, compared with the “tranquillity” experienced here. Whilst material difficulties appeared less pressing for the Italian participants, these also experienced employment precariousness in Italy, which strongly limited their independence (also Scotto 2015; Varriale 2017), and seemed equally pessimistic about their future prospects there.

The income gained abroad enabled many to establish more independent, rewarding lives (also Heath et al. 2015; Varriale 2017). Marina, a 29-year-old Italian, was content that, although her first job in a bar did not bring “a royal salary”, it paid the bills, and allowed her to “go out every now and then”. Corina, a Romanian graduate who started in cleaning, offers a good illustration of how even the minimum pay abroad could expand migrants’ capacity to experiment with enticing lifestyles:

Even when I was on the minimum wage, I felt I was living well, I could buy what food I wanted, if I wanted oysters and what else, I could taste, I could try. In Romania, no, I couldn’t... such culinary adventures cost much more.

Furthermore, moving to Britain meant residing independently. Living with parents is widespread amongst youth in both Italy and Romania. In 2016, 66 per cent of Italians and 59

per cent of Romanians aged 18-34 lived with their parents, well above the EU28 average of 48 per cent (Eurostat 2017d). For many participants, living independently thus constituted a significant gain of migration, even when it involved shared, precarious accommodation in London's expensive housing market. Valeria, a 22-year-old Italian, underlined the combined benefit of financial and residential independence her income abroad afforded:

If you don't have a job, you can't have your independence, go out, have fun... Here, at 19, I could live on my own already. It was a room, ok, but I was independent from my family... Now, at 22, I have a real flat. In Italy, I could have never afforded [renting] that.

The separation from family was particularly relevant for Italian interviewees, who often enjoyed a "sheltered life" in the family home pre-migration. However, several Romanians too felt empowered by the possibility to "provide for themselves" and escape the dependence on or proximity to family at home.

All-consuming careers

Although many participants worked below their qualifications, a common theme in their narratives was the strong belief in the wide career opportunities in the UK, compared to the dire employment prospects at home. The perceived meritocracy of the UK labour market (Dubucs et al. 2017; Moroşanu and Fox 2013), but also the flexibility of employers and numerous training opportunities, made many believe they could "make the impossible possible", if they "rolled up [their] sleeves" and pursued their ambitions. That Romanian workers (unlike Italians) were sometimes viewed with scorn or distrust did not necessarily weaken their optimism; work ethic and competences seemingly mattered most (Moroşanu and Fox 2013).

Work and work-related aspirations thus occupied an enormous part of migrants' lives and thinking. Unlike participants' detailed work accounts, reflections on leisure and family

plans often remained remarkably brief and elusive. Instead of using migration to enjoy “time out” from adult-like responsibilities (Amit 2011), our young Europeans, much like traditional migrant workers, often committed long hours to their jobs or job development, enjoying little time for non-work life. Valentin, a 31-year-old Romanian, provides a telling example of the all-consuming nature of migrants’ career-related endeavours. Employed in car sales, Valentin quickly progressed from being a “simple driver” to “selling cars worth hundreds of thousands of pounds” and becoming a “role model” at work, much to the surprise of his initially sceptical managers. Echoing research on Eastern Europeans in Britain (Moroşanu 2016, 358), he attributed these achievements to his ambition and abilities, which earned his employer’s appreciation and enabled him to improve professionally in a perceived meritocratic system. Yet building a successful career had a price. Asked about the prospect of having children, Valentin hesitatingly explained that he and his partner “invested too much in work”, alongside relocating and “starting from scratch” several times. Before coming to London, he had run a business in Italy, which he had to close, “losing” eight years of work. Although more settled now, he put his career ambitions above everything else, acknowledging somewhat frustratedly the cost borne by his personal life:

I spend very, very long hours [at work]. I also have very high aims, and the fact that I have the ambition to do something... you don’t think about getting a day off any more... I can afford to do whatever I want... but you don’t, you don’t have time to rejoice... And those ten days you spend on holiday... they go so quickly... we returned from holiday in January and I can’t wait, I can’t wait to go again in November.

Valentin’s success was perhaps exceptional, yet he was not alone in committing considerable time to work. Many others, employed in modestly-paying jobs, emphasised the time pressure and energy-draining rhythm of their workplace. Francesco, a 21-year-old

Italian working in hospitality, was “always running like crazy”. The pace and nature of work made others like Barbara struggle to pursue non-work interests in “chaotic” London:

I was used to doing lots of things in Italy. A thousand things, a thousand interests, a thousand commitments... Here you find that you don't have enough time, energy, or strength to do anything. Because after your hours of work, counting the time that you need to go and come back... Here, you don't have a car... everything grows larger and your energies vanish... And then you don't have enough time to do what you like, what interests you.

Apart from working long hours, various participants struggled to advance their careers. The perceived opportunities abounding in Britain constituted a powerful incentive to seek more fulfilling careers, through volunteering, training or further studies. Paolo, an Italian who aspired to work in the music industry, which would allow him to “express himself” but seemed impossible in Italy, highlighted the drive and effort needed to pursue such career ambitions, shared by many migrants: “when we decided to move here it was because we want to develop, and to develop you need to work your ass off, literally”.

Developing one's career often meant domestic transitions lagged behind (see also Favell 2008, 160). Crina, a Romanian with a British-earned Psychology degree, exemplifies this trade-off. Disappointed with the Romanian university system and struggling financially, Crina interrupted her studies and came to Britain. Working as an *au pair*, she saved for resuming her studies to eventually pursue a rewarding career. Every day she patiently flipped through the pages of a course inventory to “realise what [she] wanted to do”. Failing to secure a commensurate job post-graduation, Crina became assistant manager in a busy coffee shop. Yet, her ambition to build a career in Psychology did not dwindle over time. Armed with a firm belief in the opportunities available in Britain, she quit her exhausting job after two years to free up time to pursue her dream, planning to start volunteering and postgraduate studies. Asked about children, she found it impossible to fit them in:

For the kind of work I presently want to get involved in, the shifts, there are some night shifts, and you study at the same time, you write a dissertation, and you do three placements at the same time, it would be impossible for me. On relationships, I don't know, I'm not the kind of person who says 'no' because I focus on this. If it happens, it happens... But children, clearly no...

Routine demographic questions about children raised surprise, embarrassment or ironic remarks amongst many other participants. Asked about future plans, many mentioned career goals, and their settlement or relocation considerations hinged substantially on this. Unlike the Polish migrants studied by Heath et al. (2015), who followed a partner or found one post-migration, and used the relative autonomy earned by working abroad to “bring forward” family-related transitions, our participants typically prioritised their careers, at the expense of personal life. Either caught up in their hectic jobs or striving to “step up” in their job, “time was not on [their] side”, affecting their domestic and social life.

In some ways, this echoes features of “liquid migration” (Engbersen and Snel 2013), a notion developed in the context of post-Accession East-West migration, which portrays these “new” Europeans as young, temporary migrants, often economically-driven, unconstrained by family responsibilities, and undecided about the future, aided by free mobility and growing individualisation (Lulle et al. 2018). Conventional aspirations towards family and “settling down” in the future emerged when prompted, and may become more salient with age (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Favell 2008). Yet the progress and clarity of goals in the spheres of work and independent living were presently hardly matched in the domestic realm, suggesting that migration advanced some transitions at a faster pace than others.

Perceptions of “growing up”

As the previous section showed, migration often enabled participants to enter stable employment, become financially and residentially independent, and get on a career track, yet

many lived in rented, often shared, accommodation, sometimes considered further education, and remained vague about marriage or children. When traditional paths to adulthood become unattainable or delayed, young people have been shown to resort to individualistic attributes to define “adulthood”, such as responsibility and freedom to decide about one’s life (Arnett 2000; Silva 2013). However, studying young Canadians, Molgat (2007) found that individualistic markers of adulthood may coexist with traditional ones, which often define societal expectations, and may underpin the former. Whereas our participants often articulated, when prompted, conventional future plans about family formation, “dream” jobs, and stable homes, echoing Amit (2011), they concomitantly emphasised how they had “grown up” abroad, even when these milestones remained distant. We next illustrate the crucial role migration played therein, generating both negative and positive experiences, which distinguished them from non-migrant peers.

“When you go and live on your own, you grow up”

For some, growing up was accelerated by various challenges encountered abroad, which sharpened their skills and “hardened” their selves (Silva 2013). The story of Vlad, a 24-year-old Romanian, who was deceived by an acquaintance upon arriving in London and found himself living on the street until he found a car washing job, thanks to money from a stranger that bought him a bus ticket, is emblematic in this respect. Following the struggle to find decently-paid work in Romania, the harsh start abroad made Vlad acutely aware of the risks of migration, and see the ability to “survive”, “earn your bread” and get “a roof over your head” as vital skills in life. Several physically-demanding, low-paid jobs, from car washing to kitchen porter and chef, finally afforded him some security. These difficulties, however, made him “much more mature” and “vigilant”.

Whilst Vlad's case may be extreme, others similarly attributed their "growing up" to the challenges of "managing alone" in an unfamiliar environment, without solid support nearby. This involved finding work or accommodation, navigating new institutions, and making important decisions without "mom and dad's moral or economic support", according to Francesco. Yet, unlike Vlad's, most "growing up" narratives had a less bitter taste, reflecting less severe predicaments, and the confidence gained in overcoming them. Stefano, another Italian, emphasised that abroad "you end up alone and you have to decide what your way is on your own" but was enthusiastic about "being 100 per cent independent". Valeria also migrated to "find her independence", when struggling to find work in Italy, despite her family's support, and encouraged a friend to follow suit: "come here, don't worry, you'll grow up, build your own life, have your own experiences, detach yourself from your family" (also Varriale 2017). These examples echo Kennedy's (2010) EU postgraduates in Manchester, who relish the escape from social pressures at home, and the freedom, self-confidence, and self-growth gained via living abroad (also Favell 2008), as well as King's (2011) accounts of "gap years" for work or travelling.

Alongside facing challenges alone, participants highlighted positive experiences that helped them grow personally and professionally, develop new skills or lives abroad, echoing Kennedy (2010) and King (2011) above. Oana, a 21-year-old Romanian student, who rented a flat and worked part-time, cherished the freedom to design her living space and life path more generally:

I decorated the house how I wanted, here I do everything how I want, and I really feel
I put effort and soul in everything I did over here... that is why I like it very much that
I have this freedom, to do something.

Crina, introduced earlier, was deeply impressed by the cultural events and possibilities to "self-educate" in London. Others stressed the opportunity to meet people from "all over the

world” (also Lulle et al. 2018). Contrary to Vlad’s sobering account, Rosa’s words exemplify the positive spin many participants gave to growing up away from home:

Getting to know so many new cultures in London, you learn to respect other people... then, considering all the difficulties that living in such a big city carries with it, in a place which is so different from yours, you grow up... I don’t know how to express it... but... you psychologically grow up in a terrific way...

Although many interviewees were not truly “settled” in their work and non-work lives, migration acted as a “turning point” (Rumbaut 2005), unleashing a series of changes and challenges, which generated a sense of “growing up” that reflected more individualistic criteria of adulthood, such as self-reliance, independent decision-making or self-growth. For Italians and Romanians alike, migration was central to coming of age, irrespective of whether this was a difficult or exciting journey to undertake. One notable difference resided in the meaning of independence for Romanians from more modest backgrounds, who managed to “provide for themselves” and “achieve something” alone, compared to Italian participants who “escaped” the protection, more than limited means, of family back home.

“Growing up” in transnational perspective

Whilst grounded in experiences abroad, participants’ sense of “growing up” and self-development is best understood in relation to the trajectories of their home-based peers, who could endorse or challenge migrants’ achievements, highlighting again how objective and subjective markers of adulthood might intersect.

First, growing up abroad is often contrasted with the perceived stagnation or unremarkable trajectories of peers who stayed. These were seen as “stuck” in precarious jobs or predictable careers. Marriage and children meant they had settled into more domestic “grown-up” lifestyles, less compatible with migrants’ leisure pursuits (Favell 2008; Gabriel 2006; Moroşanu 2013). Their “ordinary” lives and concerns struck surprise or

condescendence amongst the migrants. Attending a reunion with old schoolmates in Italy, Claudio felt they were “stuck back in time”. Their conversation revolved around “trivial” matters, such as old resentments or romances, missing the “big picture” or the real “priorities in life”:

They have not moved on, either physically or mentally. They have grown up *inside the same patterns* but haven’t explored anything outside... That these people still considered these kinds of things important was really disarming for me.

By contrast, various participants emphasised the “serious” matters or decisions they confronted abroad, often with little guidance or support, which shaped their character and distinguished them from non-migrants. Exploring working-class Americans’ transitions to adulthood, Silva (2013) highlights the “heroic tales of self-sufficiency” and “hardened selves” that youth develop due to difficult family circumstances, frustration or betrayal experienced in school or the labour market. Although in a different sense, migrants’ experiences of overcoming difficulties alone and starting anew abroad also “hardened” their character, allowing them to assert more resilient, independent versions of adulthood than those attained in the “sheltered” home environment.

Yet the migration experience did not just harden youth’s character; it also prompted some to claim more unique forms of adulthood over those who had not ventured far beyond home. This recalls the gap-year experiences documented by King (2011), which conferred an “edge” over those who entered university directly from school, in terms of maturity and life experience. For example, when visiting her southern Romanian hometown, Crina thought it looked like a “grey hole”. The economic situation, her brother’s “avalanche” of complaints, or people’s behaviour seemed depressing. Outraged at the derogatory remarks about women voiced by male teenagers in her family, she stressed how much *she* learned and changed through migration.

Whilst Crina attributed her self-development more to the educational opportunities encountered in London, many others saw living abroad *per se* as a profoundly mind-opening, enriching experience (Favell 2008; Kennedy 2010). Living in a multicultural environment gave Ana a “wider vision on many aspects of life”, an experience missed by non-migrants. Marcel, a Romanian researcher, became more tolerant, whilst his family and peers retained the same “mentality”, quoting remarks such as “Hungarians invade[d] our country, the Gypsies are bad”, now unacceptable to him. And Stefano too learned that “diversity was not a bad thing”, looking with scorn and sadness at people of his age, who had his “grandmother’s mentality” and his Italian home village, which seemed “frozen in time”, marked by negative attitudes towards ethnic, racial or sexual difference (see Kennedy 2010; Scotto 2015). Paolo best captures this edge gained by travelling and living abroad over those who stay put. Counting himself extremely lucky to have encountered people “from everywhere”, which helped him weigh things differently, and develop a new perspective on the world, Paolo underlined: “if you live in your world, which is home, TV...you don’t grow up, you don’t mature, you don’t understand how the world is”.

Comparisons with non-migrants thus enabled participants to claim not only more independent but also richer adult identities. The migration experience did not simply harden their selves, through obstacles overcome alone, but offered “cultural enrichment” and unique life lessons, which profoundly changed their worldviews. Nevertheless, these versions of adulthood, anchored in personal and psychological development, received variable reactions, showing how adulthood remains an “interactional accomplishment”, contingent on recognition by relevant others (Silva 2012), which acquires a transnational dimension in migration contexts.

If some became “celebrities” in their families, this was usually due to acquiring traditional emblems of adulthood, such as respectable careers and qualifications, rather than

personal development. Valentin, who performed poorly in school and disappointed his mother previously, contentedly emphasised that his successful career made his family proud. Conversely, migrants' failure to meet traditional expectations raised disapproval amongst home peers, with little regard to their self-growth. Crina, the 31-year-old Psychology graduate, did not want a family quickly but was maliciously reminded by friends from home of her "unwise" choice: "You're getting old, you won't be fertile anymore. We already have our second [child], and you don't have any. You don't even have a husband yet". Although Crina felt she had developed substantially abroad, she was seen as "not accomplished":

[Mom] is very upset that I don't have an office job. Because for them, an office job means you are accomplished... And I try to explain to them, this is not what I want to do, no, no, this is not my passion, why would I want to focus on an office job when I want to specialise further? And she... gives me examples of such and such, who have been away for two years, and 'look at them, we see them on Facebook, look what holidays they go on, what jobs they have, and you?'.

Such examples of recognition or non-recognition from relevant "others" (Molgat 2007), alongside migrants' future aspirations, highlight the continued presence of traditional understandings of adulthood in their lives, signalling some limits to the freedom associated with "liquid migration", and calling for a transnational perspective (Tse and Waters 2013) to fully grasp how migrants make the transition to adulthood, the expectations and challenges they stumble across on the way.

Conclusion

By examining Italians' and Romanians' experiences in Britain, this paper has provided a more nuanced and differentiated picture of transitions to, and meanings of, adulthood for "old" and "new" European movers, combining insights from youth transitions studies and migration research. The relatively few studies that bridge these literatures tend to see

migration as either a strategy to delay adulthood (Amit 2011; Kato 2013; Waters et al. 2011), often typical of privileged youth, or one to advance adulthood, prompted by limited opportunities and insecurity at home (Crivello 2011; Heath et al. 2015; Punch 2015). Our analysis offers a more complex picture, showing that migration may unevenly affect and decouple transitions to adulthood, advancing some, whilst others lag behind, contrary to traditional views of adulthood that saw them as happening concomitantly. Furthermore, we extend debates around the meanings of adulthood developed in non-migration contexts (Arnett 2000; Molgat 2007; Silva 2013) by highlighting the central role migration plays in perceptions of “growing up”, allowing migrants to claim “superior” versions of adulthood over non-migrant peers. Whilst supporting research that emphasises individualistic markers of adulthood, we showed how both old and new understandings of adulthood might impact migrants’ experience (Molgat 2007). Comparing how Italians and Romanians in Britain make and interpret their transition to adulthood additionally revealed many similarities amongst “old” and “new” European youth, despite different contexts of origin and reception.

For both Italians and Romanians, migration helped advance professional and residential transitions. Although still far from their desired careers, many participants secured relatively stable jobs and independent lives, leaving behind the poor employment opportunities and family support which constrained their coming of age at home. Whilst both cherished the independence gained abroad, one notable difference resided in its meaning, linked to overcoming more acute material hardship experienced by some Romanians, compared to detachment from family, more prevalent amongst Italians.

Migrants’ progress in terms of work and independent living was hardly matched in the domestic sphere. Despite their different reception, negatively affecting Romanians, our “old” and “new” Europeans similarly praised the opportunities available in Britain, and concentrated on their studies or careers (Lulle et al. 2018). Compared to migrants’ elaborate

work-related accounts, reflections on family or leisure were remarkably elusive, marked by irony or frustration, illustrating the uneven process of transitioning to adulthood abroad.

This partial accomplishment of traditional markers of adulthood, however, didn't prevent participants from feeling they had "grown up" post-migration. Whilst objective markers of adulthood, such as steady employment, undoubtedly contributed to migrants' sense of independence, this was significantly augmented by the migration experience itself, signalling individualistic markers of adulthood (Arnett 2000; Silva 2013). The changes, risks or advantages generated by migration ranged from struggling to survive alone to carving an independent life, developing broader identities, new values, and knowledge of the world, through diverse interactions and life experiences in cosmopolitan London or Brighton. The positive and negative experiences that engendered a sense of "growing up" showed how migration acted as a "turning point" (Rumbaut 2005), allowing both Italians and Romanians to articulate not only more resilient, expert versions of adulthood but also, sometimes, more "exciting" ones, compared to home-based peers. If the latter appeared "stuck" in domestic activities, unremarkable lives or conservative views, migrants "[grew] up in a terrific way" abroad. Their coming of age thus turns the "stale taste" of adulthood associated with renouncing freedom and social life in non-migration contexts (Molgat 2007, 508) upside down. Romanians sometimes experienced more severe economic hardship, but the joys and difficulties of "managing alone" are largely shared across the two migrant populations.

The varied role migration played in participants' self-perception of growing up supports and extends recent understandings of adulthood centred on individualistic, rather than traditional, markers. However, the latter also surfaced occasionally, particularly in migrants' future aspirations and relationships with "significant others" from home, who enhanced or challenged their achievements, illustrating the coexistence of old and new understandings of adulthood, and more generally, its transnational construction in migration

contexts. If participants' independence and career ambitions recall features of "liquid migration", their pursuits were not entirely unconstrained by traditional norms and institutions. Combining insights from youth transitions studies and migration research, our analysis thus offers a more nuanced picture of the bumpy process and complex meanings of coming of age, and uncovers the many shared experiences of transitioning to adulthood amongst young Europeans on the move.

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